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Buffalo Bill's Sure-Shots.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



BUFFALO BILL BEHELD THE SURE-SHOTS AS HE PEERED DOWN INTO A CAVERN THROUGH THE CREVICE.

Buffalo Bill's Sure-Shots;

OR,

BUCK DAWSON'S BIG DRAW.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ONLY A BOY.

"Now, pards, we've got him! Throw!"

Half a dozen lassoes thrown with vigor and skill fell about the head and shoulders of a rider passing along a western trail, and in an instant he was dragged heavily from his saddle to the ground, while his horse, attempting to bound away, was also caught in the coil and brought to a sudden halt.

Half springing to his feet the one who was lassoed gave suddenly three loud, ringing, distinct whistles that could be heard almost a mile away.

Were they a signal for help? Or were they intended as a warning of danger?

With a bound the men who had cast their lassoes sprung from their hiding places behind the rocks upon either side of the trail, and in an instant had their prey bound fast.

"Why, pards, it's only a boy!" cried the leader.

"So it is," from the others, half a dozen in number, gazing at their captive.

"Yes, I am a boy, for I am but eighteen, but I am man enough to face your coward gang if I only had my arms free," was the plucky response.

The men showed their amazement at his nerve and appearance.

He was tall, slender, yet wiry in build, while his broad shoulders denoted great strength.

Bronzed was his face by exposure, yet every feature was well molded and characteristic. He was a handsome youth.

His hair was long and waving, and he looked just what he was—a bold adventurer into a wild west, with a wilder class of men frequenting it, and from which the Indians had not yet been beaten back, and where lawlessness reigned almost supreme.

Dressed in a blue woolen shirt, beneath collar a knotted scarf, a pair of corduroy pants stuck in the tops of high boots, and wearing upon his head a slouch hat, his appearance was both bold and picturesque.

He was armed with revolvers and bowie; a rifle hung at his saddle horn, and he carried a roll of blankets, bag of provisions, another of cooking utensils, saddle bags well stocked, and a lariat, while he was mounted upon a clean-limbed, hardy plain's pony.

His captors, seven in number, were typical border desperadoes.

Their horses were back down the slope, and they had been lying in wait on the trail for some purpose, when they saw the youth coming up the range toward them.

"You're a plucky one, and no mistake, for a kid; but, we don't scare a little bit, so just go slow if you wish to find favor with us," warned the leader.

"I ask no favors, but I do ask why you dared lasso me and drag me from my saddle?" was the angry retort.

"It's for me ter do the questioning, young feller, not you, and I asks you what yer give that whistle signal fer just now."

"That is none of your business."

"Is you alone?"

"I was until I met your gang."

"What are you doing out here?"

"Hunting."

"Where did you come from?"

"Texas."

"I might hev know'd thet from yer narve. Where is you goin'?"

"Anywhere; anywhere I take a fancy to go."

"We may have something ter say as ter that."

"Say yer say and let me go on then."

"Does yer know who we is?"

"No, and I don't care."

"Say, cap'n, he's too fresh. I'd say just clip a ear off ter let him know we hain't tenderfeet he has ter deal with," said one of the men.

But the youth did not flinch under the cruel threat; he merely looked at the speaker and smiled.

"He'll know who we is soon enough," answered the captain.

"How is you fixed with pocket change, young feller?"

"Just what I thought; you are road-agents."

"Well, yer know we hain't ter be fooled with. We wants yer dust."

"I am poor, for all I have in the world I have with me, and surely you would not rob a boy of a few dollars."

"What does yer call a few dollars?"

"I have just eighty-five dollars."

"We'll take it, and along with it yer horse and outfit, and you can hoof it whar you is going—see!"

"I will not be robbed—stand back!" and the youth having managed to get each of his hands upon a revolver, drew them, half bound as he was, and faced his captors defiantly.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNSEEN FRIEND.

The attitude of the youth was a bold one in the face of such odds.

He determined in his desperate situation to make a bold stand, for he did not believe the desperadoes would dare to kill him.

Not having been bound, further than to have the coils of the lassoes about him, he had half freed his hands, and had managed, by a sudden move, to reach his revolvers.

The outlaws were astonished at his bold act, and each seemed to feel that one of the boy's weapons covered him in particular.

In such a position they waited for their captain to speak.

He now did so, and said: "Don't be a fool, kid, for we don't wish to kill you."

"Then let me go my way."

"That I won't do, for you has got money, and we wants it."

"If I give you what money I have will you let me go with my horse, weapons, and outfit?"

"Can't think of it, for we wants it all."

"And you would leave me afoot to starve out here?"

"It hain't over thirty mile to the first of the mining camps, and a chipper lad like you is can git work there—maybe yer'd strike it rich."

"I know that you are big odds against me, but I feel that I can drop two of you, anyhow, so if you kill me I will have company. Now, what is your game?"

Still undismayed, the lad stood at bay, and the men were facing him, yet not one dared make a move to draw a revolver.

The boy's eyes seemed to rest upon each man, and no one dared make a spring in upon him.

"Say, young feller, as I said afore, we

don't wish to kill yer, but you is going to make us do it."

"Well, I have but one time to die, and, though I did hope to accomplish much by coming out here, I shall meet my fate without fear, and if I die some of you go the same trail with me."

There was no bravado in his words or look; it was simply resignation.

"Well, you do be a nervy one, and no mistake," avowed the captain.

"Then let us compromise, come to terms of some kind, so that neither side backs down."

"You are a good one, kid."

"No thanks for the compliment. I've got your seven men afraid to blink an eye or move a hand, and you've got me at bay, and are sure of me, as I am of some of you, so let us strike a bargain."

"What does yer mean?"

"I'll give up the money I told you I had if you'll let me go with my outfit."

"You've got more than you said."

"I have only what I told you I had."

"You have got ter let us search yer?"

"I will not."

"Then we don't strike no bargain."

"You had better, for you will be the first one I drop if I am forced to pull trigger, and I warn you that I am like a cat, hard to kill, while I know where to send a bullet for life, and can take several of you along before I go under. So you'd better come to terms."

These, his fearless words, and bold front fairly dismayed the desperadoes; they did not know just what to do.

The boy's leveled weapons did not quiver. Firm as a rock were his hands, and his eyes were upon each one of his foes.

The desperado captain saw that there was but one thing to do. Once he had come to terms with the youth, those revolvers down, he would act as he pleased.

So he said:

"All right, Boy Pard; I'll strike a trade with yer, for yer jist beats all I ever seen in a youngster, and I likes yer style. I wouldn't kill such as yer fer a good deal, and I'll show how I likes yer by saying thet yer kin jine our band if yer wishes ter do so."

"Join a band of cutthroats to save my life? You don't know me! I'd rather die honest than live a thief and a murderer."

These bold words greatly angered the men, but the captain said:

"Keep quiet, pards, fer every one has a right to his opinions. I said I'd make terms with the kid, and I will, fer I agrees to take the cash he has and let him go with his life and the rest of his outfit."

"You, Sam, jist step forward and let him pay you over the cash."

The man addressed as Sam did not seem to relish the duty of being collector, but he stepped forward while the youth called out:

"You mean square, captain, for its honor among thieves, you know."

"Yes, all is square," and as the youth lowered his revolvers each desperado whipped out a weapon and covered him, while Sam called out:

"I has yer now, young feller."

They were Sam's last words, for a sharp report rang out in the distance, and the desperado dropped dead!

Some unseen friend had chipped in!

CHAPTER III.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

The outlaw band, with the one exception of the man who had dropped under the unseen shot's deadly aim, sprang to the cover of the rocks, while the youth

was left standing alone in the open trail, his horse near him.

Almost at his feet lay the dead desperado, while now half a dozen revolvers were covering him, and those who held them were under cover of the rocks.

"Men, I'll keep my eye and gun on ther kid, while you looks around to find out who fired thet shot," said the captain, seemingly more anxious to guard his prisoner than to reconnoitre for the one whose aim had been so unerring.

The men looked about them anxiously.

They were not desirous of looking for the unseen and unknown foe any more than was their leader.

"I say, cap'n, it's ther one he gave thet signal to," suggested one.

"Yes, I kinder thought he wasn't alone," the captain rejoined. "Ther shot came from over there in thet thicket, so you men flank around both ways and see if you can't get a shot at him."

The men slowly prepared to obey. They crept along among the rocks upon their hands and knees. This seemed to amuse the youth, for he laughed as he said:

"Better crawl like the snakes you are lest your heads be seen above the rocks and bushes, and you get another shot."

The heads went down at once, the leader crouching lowest.

But no shot came and he called out:

"Make haste, men; I'll keep this kid under cover and bore him, too, if he makes a move."

"Better tie him afore we go," suggested one.

"That's so. Jist rope him!" ordered the captain.

The men all crawled to where the youth stood, the leader keeping his revolver resting upon a rock and leveled at their captive, who now well knew that a move on his part to resist or to escape would be fatal.

The lariats were still about his body. With these the men tied the boy's hands behind him, his feet were secured, and one lasso was left with the noose about his neck, the other end in the hands of the leader.

Then the five crept among the bushes, while their captain, crouching low among the rocks, still kept his revolver aimed and the lariat in hand to drag him down should he attempt to move off.

"Say, who fired thet shot, young feller?" asked the leader.

"I did not see who fired it, but it was a dead shot, wasn't it?"

"Too dead for poor Sam, and for you, too."

"What have I got to do with it?"

"You knows who did it. You has a pard, and he is hanging around; but, my men will git him soon."

"I'll make you a bet that they don't."

There was such cool assurance in this wager that the outlaw looked anxiously about him, as if expecting he would be the next target for the unseen dead shot.

"I don't bet with a dying man, young fellow."

"I don't understand you."

"You is jist ther same as dead."

"I'm all right."

"Don't yer believe it, for you'll soon have yer toes turned up."

"You intend to kill me?"

"Yes, I does. Out here ther game is a life fer a life."

"I have taken no life."

"Yer pard did, an' as we can't git ther man as did it, you'll hev to be ther one ter suffer."

"I am sure you and your gang would be guilty of anything, for you broke faith with me a while since."

"Did you think we was fools to let yer go with half when we had all?"

"I thought you might acknowledge the truth of honor among thieves and let me go as you agreed."

"You was away off; and, as you is guilty of Sam's death, we'll jist hang you when the boys comes —"

A shot rang out over in the thicket, and then others were fired in rapid succession.

Then came a loud call:

"Thar he goes, pards, and he's a boy!"

In a few moments the outlaws came back, one of them with his head bleeding where a bullet had cut its way along the side to the skull.

"Is yer much hurt, Pete," called out the captain.

"My hard head alone saved me, fer the bullet were aimed straight."

"Who shot you, Pete?"

"A boy as is about like this one. He were creeping up to git another shot, and we seen each other about ther same time, but he was quicker than greased lightning, and got a pull on me fust, and give me this remembrance."

"He were coming fer me, but ther boys showed up, and he ran back to some pines, got on his horse, and skipped, and I don't believe a bullet touched him or his critter, fer he did actually laugh at us."

"Well, we have scared him off, so now let's lose no time but hang this kid, and then git onter ther trail of t'other one, fer maybe he's well fixed, too."

"Yes, cap'n, hang him up, fer I says a life fer a life," urged one of the gang, and the others answered with a shout to show their satisfaction in the decision.

"Say, young feller, git ter work, an' what prayers yer hain't fergot, for we is going ter dig a grave fer yer and Sam, and when it is done, yer is ter hang, and don't yer forgit it!" announced the outlaw captain.

"I won't forget it," was the reply, and the pathos in his voice showed how fully he felt the position he was in.

If the one who had fired the shot was indeed a friend, he reasoned that he could give him no further aid against such odds.

But he was still game, and showed no fear as he turned his eyes upon them while they set to work digging his grave.

CHAPTER IV.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

The trap into which the unfortunate youth had ridden had been avoided by one who was following him, and perhaps half a mile in his rear.

This other one had halted on the trail to cut a few choice steaks from a deer he had killed, while his companion had ridden on ahead to find a camping place for the noonday meal and to build a fire.

It was to this companion that the whistle signal had been given, and it had been heard and recognized as a warning of danger.

"Ah! Harold is in trouble—what can it be?" said the one who was following on the trail, and he urged his horse onward to see just what trouble his comrade had met with.

Like the captured youth, he was a youth also, scarcely as old, yet well formed for his years, and with a clean-cut, daring face.

He was attired like his friend, well mounted, armed and equipped, and certainly looked like one to tie to in time of need.

Having ridden at a gallop until he

came to where he would be seen from the ridge ahead, he flanked off to the right through some pines and gained a position where he could scan the trail his friend had been following.

He saw at some distance off, in a hollow, seven horses feeding and secured by stake ropes.

Dismounting, he made his horse fast to a tree, and proceeded on foot with the greatest caution.

Creeping closer and closer, he at last gained a position from which he could see back over the trail. He beheld his comrade, dismounted, encircled with lariats, and his horse hitched near.

But that was not all, for seven heavily bearded, long-haired, rough-looking men were grouped about his companion, and their actions showed that they were trying to intimidate the prisoner.

"It is a band of road-agents and they have held up poor Harold."

"My God! He has the money I placed in his keeping, besides all his own! What shall I—what can I do?"

He swung his rifle around as he spoke, and his face was white and anxious-looking.

"Ah! I believe they are going to kill him!" he suddenly cried.

"I will risk a shot, though it is taking chances at this distance with Harold in their midst. But, at least, I may scare them off."

With this he took deliberate aim, as he saw one man level a revolver at his comrade, and pulled trigger.

The result the reader knows, and the youth laughed lightly as he saw the other outlaws spring to cover.

But his friend remained in sight and bound, it seemed to him, while he could see that he was under cover of several revolvers.

"I will snake my way around and see if I can get nearer by way of the trail we were on," he muttered, and at once began to retrace his steps to his horse, watching as he went to see if he could get in another shot.

But the outlaws were also on the watch for him, and suddenly he beheld a man before him in the pines.

Instantly his rifle flashed again and the man dropped.

But yells were heard here and there, shots were fired, bullets came dangerously near to him, and he bounded to his horse, threw himself into his saddle, and was off like a flash, a defiant shout upon his lips, as he knew that neither his horse nor himself had been touched.

Determined to get back upon the trail he had been following, and approach the spot where his comrade was in trouble from that direction, as he felt that they would not be on the watch for him from that direction, he rode swiftly along through the pines to get at the bottom of the range he was on and then follow it up until he came to the trail leading up the slope.

To do this he had nearly a mile to ride, and was just nearing the plain, by the best way he could pick out, down the slope, when a break in the pines gave him a view that brought him to a sudden standstill.

Along the base of the range rode a well-defined trail, and behind a larger rock crouched three Indians.

One of them wore a chief's war bonnet and had a rifle, while the other two were braves and were armed with bows and arrows.

They were there evidently for some purpose, and their backs were toward the youth, while they were a couple of hundred yards distant.

The pine straw had deadened the sound of hoofs, and the youth's presence was not known or their danger from the rear suspected.

Having moved back until the pines hid himself and horse, should the Indians look around, the boy begun to search for the cause of the ambush he saw.

He looked out upon the plain, and at once located the one which the Indians were waiting for.

It was a horseman, following along the trail that must bring him within fifty feet of the redskins in ambush.

A closer look showed that it was a white man, and he was coming along at a walk and wholly unconscious of the hidden danger before him, as were the Indians of the foe behind them.

"They intend to kill him, but I will save him," muttered the youth, and, rifle in hand, he begun to get nearer to the trio of redskins.

CHAPTER V.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

With great caution the youth, himself a fugitive from merciless foes, and anxious to save his comrade from death or captivity, crept through the pines until he gained a position within a hundred yards of the ambushed Indians.

He could also see the plain and command a view of the trail, along which the horseman was coming for fully a quarter of a mile.

Thus he waited until this rider should come into view.

The chief, who had the rifle, would be his game, he decided, for, by bringing him down he would not only prevent the firing upon the horseman, but put the latter upon his guard and scare the two surprised redskins who were armed with the bows and arrows.

"I can take care of them with my revolvers," muttered the youth.

Then, as the horseman did not appear, he added: "How long it takes him to come! He must be riding very slow. I am very anxious, for Harold must be saved from that gang, and if the man I now keep from being killed will help me we can do it, I guess.

"But what if the man is one of the gang? He is very likely to be; but I'll save his life anyhow, now, if I have to kill him afterward.

"Ah! He is coming into sight at last!"

As the youth spoke the horseman came into view, his horse at a slow walk.

The Indians crouched close behind the rocks, and the chief leveled his gun with a rest.

The braves fitted their best arrows to their bowstrings, and all three were as still as statues.

Nearer and nearer drew the horseman, wholly unconscious of his danger.

As he approached the youth had a chance to see him well.

He was at once impressed by his striking appearance; for his horse was a noble animal, a long-bodied, clean-limbed roan, equipped with a handsome Texan saddle and bridle.

The rider sat his saddle like one perfectly at home there, and a pair of saddle bags, saddle roll, blankets, and provision bag showed that the horseman was upon a long trail.

A rifle hung from the saddle horn upon one side, a coiled lariat upon the other, and a belt of arms encircled the rider's waist.

All this the youth took in minutely.

But, it was the superb physique and the face of the horseman that most impressed the watching boy.

He was of perfect form, clad in buck-

skin leggings, hunting shirt, top boots, and a large gray sombrero.

His face was one to remember when once seen; darkly bronzed, clean cut, handsome, fearless, with military-looking mustache and imperial, long, waving black hair and eyes that were large and piercing.

"If he isn't every inch a square man then his looks lie terribly," muttered the youth, as he took his almost fascinated gaze off the horseman and ran his eyes along his rifle barrel aimed at the Indian Chief.

The latter had his eye on the sights of his rifle, and another moment he would have sent a fatal bullet upon its flight; but ere he touched the trigger as firm a hand sent a shot on its way to end his career, for there was a sharp report, a whiz, and a bullet entered the brain of the ambushed chief.

In a heap he sunk behind the rock, while his two companions with startled eyes sprang to their feet and turned to face the foe behind them.

As they did so, the youth had his revolver out, and another shot struck one of the braves squarely in the face, just as the other dropped also in his tracks, for the horseman had taken a hand in the fight, also.

The youth saw that he had slipped from his saddle, and, sheltered by his horse, was standing with his rifle thrown across his saddle.

He had realized the situation with the eye of a perfect plainsman, and seeing the two braves over the rock had fired at one as the youth brought the other down.

But he still maintained his position. He had foes in front of him, how many he did not know, yet he certainly had a friend also.

Who was he, and where was he?

The youth saw that a minute of time had wiped out the trio of Indians, and that the horseman whose life he had saved still stood at bay, watching and waiting, and the cool nerve of the man under the surprise won his admiration.

But there was no time to lose, so the youth stepped out into view, and with a shout waved his hat while he called out:

"We got them all, pard!"

The horseman at once raised his hat and came forward, while, going back for his horse, the boy joined him at the foot of the range, and just where the three dead Indians lay.

Each gazed at the other fixedly as they met.

The horseman was the first to speak, and stretching forth his hand he said in a deep, sonorous voice:

"I do not know that we have ever met before, my young friend, but we will be firm pards from this day, for I owe you my life beyond a doubt, and I am not one to forget a favor."

"I was skipping from some outlaws who held up my pard and have him a prisoner, if they have not already killed him, when I saw those redskins lying in ambush, and then caught sight of you off on the plain; so I just waited to chip in where I could do the most good."

"And you chipped in just right, young pard; but, let us not hesitate here if you have a friend in trouble."

"We can save him now, sir, if he is not killed, for I know you from the pictures I have seen of you in the papers."

"Ah! And who do you think I am?" asked the man.

"W. F. Cody—Buffalo Bill, sir."

"Yes, I am Buffalo Bill," was the modest response.

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING ACQUAINTED.

The youth had heard of the great scout, had read of him, and had made him his ideal of splendid manhood.

It had been his dream, his hope, some day to meet the Border King in Buckskin face to face, and now his acquaintance with his ideal had begun by his saving his life!

"Well, pard, as you know who I am, suppose you tell me who you are, and what brings you out into this wild land, though that you are at home here I have had reason to know?" said Buffalo Bill, with a smile as he gazed into the face of the boy, beaming as it was with admiration for him.

"I can hardly realize my good fortune, sir, in having met you, for I have known of your deeds since I could read."

"Thanks for the compliment, and let me return it by saying you have begun to make a hero of yourself in great style, for two Indians with as many shots is wonderful work for a plainsman even. You are a dead shot, young man."

"They call us the Boy Sure Shots, sir, my pard and I—in Texas, where we live."

"That is the State to produce great plainsmen."

"My father has a large ranch there, sir, and my pard was Chief of Cowboys on it, young as he is; but, then, he is not like ordinary fellows."

"Not if he is like you; but your friend, you said, was in trouble."

"Yes, sir, I stopped to cut up a deer I had shot, while he rode on to find a camp, and he ran upon seven road-agents, who held him up."

"Ah, we must see to this!"

"I heard his signal of danger when he was caught, so I was careful not to be seen, and I shot one fellow, who was aiming a revolver at my pard. Then the gang came for me, but I gave another a dose of lead and got away."

"I came this way to flank them, when I saw your danger."

"I see, and halted to save me?"

"Yes, sir, though I was a little scared that you might turn out to be another of the band."

The scout made no reply, but turned to the Indians and after looking closely at them said:

"They are Sioux, and this chief I knew as one of my most vindictive foes. Often before he has tried to kill me."

"This brave was at the fort yesterday, and there learned that I was coming this trail, so skipped off to where Black Bonnet, this chief here, was evidently waiting, and the three went into hiding to kill me. There may be more of them about, but I hardly think so."

"But, little pard, we must be off. We will now put them on the top of yonder rock, and not wait to bury them. They will be safe there from the coyotes, and a few logs or stones and pine straw will hide them from the vultures."

"But you have not yet told me your name."

"Leonard Ashley, sir, and my friend's name is Harold Hart."

"Then, Master Leonard Ashley, we will go and see what we can do to help your pard."

With this the bodies of the Indians were put upon the top of a boulder out of reach of the coyotes, and some logs were placed over them, after they had been covered with the pine droppings.

This done, the scout and the youth remounted and rode along the base of the range until they came to the stage trail leading over it.

"They are over the range, eh, on this trail, are they?"

"Yes, sir, or were."

"They are there yet, for I know just what they are waiting for."

"What is that, sir?"

"The Overland coach passes here an hour before sunset."

"I expect that is it."

"I know it is, and having plenty of time, for it will not be along for an hour yet, they first roped in your pard to rob him, and perhaps to kill him, if he did not pan out rich."

"He had nearly a hundred dollars of his own, sir, and a large roll of money for a man in the mines to whom he was carrying it, so that he might return home, for the miner has been ill and unlucky out here."

"Then he had my money, also; and that amounted to several hundred more."

"The outlaws will get a rich haul from him then, if we do not thwart them."

"Wait here while I go on ahead, but be ready to come on at my command, for they must think I have a strong support."

"I understand, sir. Give the signal or call and I'll answer, and make them believe there are more than one coming to your aid."

"That is just it," and Buffalo Bill rode up the trail to find the road-agents.

CHAPTER VII.

A SURPRISE.

Buffalo Bill dismounted before gaining the top of the ridge.

At its base, several hundred yards away, was Leonard Ashley awaiting to see him go over out of sight, when he would ride up to the place the scout then was passing.

The outlaws, if still where they had held up Harold Hart, were but a short distance from the top of the range, and the scout, with the pines and boulders on either side of the trail, knew that he could get near to them unseen unless they had a sentinel on the watch.

Knowing the trail well, Buffalo Bill was sure of the spot of the hold-up, the very place for the coach to be halted by men in ambush.

Leaving his horse over the ridge, the alert scout advanced with the noiseless step of an Indian through the pines for some distance. He then halted, for voices came to his ears.

"They are there, and that boy is indeed in dire danger. No delay now!"

"I am not afraid to die, only do not hang me, but shoot me instead, for I know now that you intend to kill me," was what the scout distinctly heard uttered by the brave lad.

"He shall be saved, be the risk what it may," was the instant resolve of the dauntless plainsman.

He dashed back through the pines, mounted his horse, and rode at a gallop over the pine straw until he came within a short distance of where the desperadoes of the Overland, hidden by the boulders, were about to commit a foul crime.

They had robbed the youth of his money, had taken his weapons from him, and, with a lariat noose about his neck, were proceeding to hang him.

A tree was near with a limb that stretched far out over the trail. Over this one end of the lasso had been thrown, and it had been pulled taut, while four men held it, awaiting the leader's command.

The boy's hands had been bound behind him, his feet were also tied, and he stood with pale face awaiting his end, yet he did not show a quiver of fear as he looked upon his merciless foes.

There lay the man his young pard had

killed, and seated upon a rock supporting his aching head, which was bound up, was the one who had been wounded by Leonard.

The outlaw leader stood before Harold with triumphant face, and the four men who were detailed as executioners were ready for the word to swing their victim into mid-air.

The stage would not be along for some hours, so they had plenty of time for the "fun," as they deemed it.

Upon the lad's coat, on the ground, lay the money taken from him, with his belt of arms and all else valuable, awaiting division after the hanging.

"Say, men, I have done you no wrong; you have robbed me of all I possess, and money that is not mine, so why hang me?" said the youth, and there was no entreaty in his voice, only reproach.

"You lied to us about the money you had, and your pard killed Sam there and wounded Ben right bad, so you have ter answer fer his work," was the unfeeling response of the outlaw leader.

"I do not want to die, though I will not be a coward if I have to; but I came out here on a mission of great importance to me, to save a man's honor, perhaps his life, and you will do no good by killing me, so let me go on my way. Moneyless though I will be, I can do some good."

"Not you, for you are too dangerous to turn loose and thus put the Government trailers upon our tracks. No! Yer has ter die, and that is all there is about it, so git yer prayers said mighty quick, fer we won't be mean enough ter hang yer and not let yer pray."

"To pray in the presence of such as you would be blasphemy. No! My heart is open to my Maker, and I will die with hope of a hereafter, but I will utter no appeal to Heaven to be greeted with jeers from you! So, do your worst, for I am ready to meet my fate!"

Did not this pluck of the boy win their admiration, or his fearless face and lone, helpless position touch their hearts?

Not so! Such brutes in human guise had hearts callous to all mercy. They would keep their threat and hang him.

"Up with him, boys, and—"

"Harm one hair of that brave boy's head and by Heaven it will be the last act of your coward lives!"

The words were uttered stern and threatening, and the men who had dragged the youth off his feet let go the lariat and turned to find that a horseman had spurred into their midst and had them covered with a revolver in each hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE REVOLVER'S MUZZLE.

"Buffalo Bill!"

The name broke from the lips of the outlaw leader, and it was echoed by his five followers.

Every eye was upon him, and not a man of the six dared make a move to draw a revolver.

The scout had ridden right up to the group of rocks unseen, had drawn his revolvers and spurred his horse into the open space, halted suddenly and faced the six road-agents.

A swoop of Indians would not have startled them as this sudden appearance of the great borderman.

Of course he was not alone. His followers must be near; perhaps even then held them under cover of their rifles.

Even a man of Buffalo Bill's great daring would not risk the odds of six to one against him, so must have a force at his call.

So they stood, helpless from sheer fright.

The youth had dropped to the ground, but, bound as he was, had risen to his feet again.

There he stood, his eyes not upon his foes, but riveted upon the scout.

The color had surged back into his face as he saw before him the man of whom he had heard since his boyhood.

Harold Hart beheld him in all his splendor of true courage—a single man confronting six desperadoes, and for his sake!

Breathing hard with suppressed excitement, the boy, a moment before upon the very brink of a terrible death, gazed in awe and wonder, and waited the outcome of Buffalo Bill's intrepid act.

His revolvers were ready for the trigger touch, and his eyes seemed to be looking upon each man before him.

They were now grouped close together, and a rapid shower of bullets into their midst would do deadly work.

They did not speak; they waited for the scout to do that.

In a moment came the order:

"One of you cut the bonds off of that youth, but if another of you moves a finger it will be the last act of his life."

The ruffians stood silent and motionless; not one of them moved to obey.

They saw not only the loss of the boy to them, and his money, but also of the Overland coach they were waiting for.

"Doc Driggs, I order you to free that boy!"

It was the leader he addressed.

The man hesitated.

"See here, Buffalo Bill, this young fellow and a pard of his fired on us, and kilt our comrade, Sam, thar; so we caught this one, and he's our game."

"You do not intend to obey, eh? Then I will give you the whole dose of Government medicine!"

Raising his voice, he called out:

"Ho, men, stand ready there!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the answer back on the ridge, and Buffalo Bill, leveling his revolver quickly at the left ear of the man he had called Doc Driggs, pulled trigger.

The report and a yell came together, and a clean-cut hole was made through the ear of the outlaw leader by the unerringly aimed bullet.

"Hands up, Doc Driggs! I have always suspected you of leading a gang of outlaws; now I have the evidence. Off with your belts and lay them before you on the ground—all of you, or be shot as you stand!"

With alacrity the order was obeyed, Doc Driggs being the first to unstring his belt.

He was deadly pale, and the blood was trickling from his wound and falling upon his shoulder.

"Now free that youth, or I will shoot to kill!"

The man sprang to the boy, and his nervous hands quickly begun to untie the lariats that bound him.

This done, he said savagely: "He's free, Buffalo Bill, but you have made me yer foe fer life."

"I would rather have your hate than your friendship, Doc Driggs," was the rejoinder. "It will afford me sincere satisfaction to even now shoot off your other ear!"

CHAPTER IX.

WELL MET.

The youth was set free with no gentle hand by the maddened road-ruffians.

"Did they rob you, young pard?" asked the scout.

"Yes, sir; of all I had."
 "That is your money with those other things there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take it, and see if you have all. If not I will search these fellows myself."

"They did not have time to hide anything, sir, so all is here."

"It is well for them that it is. Is that your horse?"

"Yes, sir."

"Buckle on your belt and arms, then mount your horse and go with me. No, Doc, I do not want your company now. I have no time to run you all in to the fort. I shall let you off this time with the warning that I have my eye upon you and every one of your gang, so beware!"

"Hands up, all of you!"

The men did not move.

"Hands up, or I'll mark the man for life who refuses!"

Up went the hands of every one of the now infuriated gang.

They caught a glance of their leader's bleeding ear.

"Now, then, turn your backs and stand in line."

The men sullenly but promptly obeyed.

"Young pard, pass along behind that gang and gather up their belts of weapons lying there."

The youth did so; every belt was secured.

"Doc Driggs, as I said, I shall let you go free now, and you will find your weapons in the trail, a quarter of a mile further on."

"Send only one of your men after them, and while waiting bury your dead companion there; then go your way. Only remember I am watching you in the future."

"Thanks for nothin'" growled the disgusted leader.

The weapons were swung upon the horn of the scout's saddle, and, leaving the men standing in line with their hands up, Buffalo Bill added:

"Now, Boy Pard, my way lies westward, so come with me if that is the way your trail goes."

"Yes, sir; but I have a comrade whom I must first find. He did not desert me, and I am not going to leave him in trouble."

"Well said; but I can take you to your comrade."

"You have met him, then, sir?" eagerly asked the youth.

"Yes; when we start on our way we will find him not far ahead, for he has flanked this spot, and had his guns ready for work on this crew."

"That's good news, sir, and I owe even more to you than I thought!"

Buffalo Bill now turned into the trail just where the horses of the outlaws were hidden in the pines.

He regarded these animals closely, then looked back at their riders, now grouped together a couple of hundred yards away, and called out:

"You are horse thieves, I see, as well as road-agents, for I recognize a Government horse here, so shall take him along."

"Go on, Buffalo Bill, if you think that is nothing to stop yer; but my time will come some day!" yelled Doc Driggs, savagely.

"The sooner the better; but I take this bay with the U. S. brand upon him," and throwing off the saddle and bridle from the fine cavalry horse he had recognized as having been stolen from the fort, the scout led him by his stake rope and continued on the trail just as Leonard Ashley rode up.

The hands of the two youths were clasped in the warmest greeting, while Leonard said:

"I owe it to this gentleman, Harold, that they did not hang me; but whom do you think he is?"

"I know, for we met an hour ago and got acquainted."

"Modestly put, Boy Pard; but let me tell your friend that he saved my life, and his telling me of his comrade in trouble sent me to your rescue."

"Now, we will leave their weapons here, and then ride on our way, for there is work for all three of us ahead."

CHAPTER X.

THE SCOUT'S FLANK MOVEMENT.

The weapons of the outlaws were dropped in the trail; then the scout and the Sure-Shots rode on, the former remarking:

"There is a valley just ahead, and the desperadoes will watch to see if we cross it."

"Do you think they will follow us, sir?" asked Harold.

"Oh, no. They will not leave their place of ambush, but remain to hold up the coach, as they think we know nothing of their real game."

"But can't we prevent that, sir?" asked Harold.

"It is just what I intend to do with your aid."

"Count on us, sir."

"Yes, indeed, for we will be only too glad to help you best that gang, sir, and we are not fearful of the odds when you lead us, Mr. Cody."

"Two to one are not such big odds, boys, if one is in the right," answered the scout, and then he continued:

"I'll tell you how we'll do it."

The two boys were all attention, and the scout went on:

"Once we have entered the timber across the valley we can ride for it at full speed. It will be a ride of ten miles, and at a clipping pace, but we must do it to head the valley and get back on the stage trail beyond the ridge, and be there in time to catch the coach, if it is on time."

"You will warn the driver and turn him back?" suggested Leonard.

"Not much! For we don't turn back out in this country, either in a good or bad cause, as you will learn when you have been here a while."

"Then you will ride on to guard the coach as they often do in Texas?" suggested Harold.

"We will not ride on our horses, but in the coach! Buck Dawson is the driver on this run, and he is as good as they make them, and ever ready for a scrap."

"And there may be passengers along?"

"No, I think the coach runs empty this trip. I hope so, for passengers don't count for much in a hold-up or shooting scrape, for they seem anxious to present the outlaws all their valuables and money, so they can save their lives."

"No, I have known nine men in a coach, and all of them fully armed and alleged fighters, quietly submit to be robbed by one man at the muzzle of a revolver."

"I have read of such things, sir, but could hardly believe it, for it seems to me I would fight if I went under, where there was one chance in twenty of winning."

"You two boys are made of stern stuff, and I feel I can tie to you."

"But the coach goes through on this run with a very large sum of money aboard, and the colonel at the fort asked me to scout the trail and see if there

were road-agents abroad, so as to warn Buck Dawson in time to save his treasure."

"I have no doubt but that their spy at the fort, whoever he is, sent the chief Black Bonnet, and his two braves ahead to kill me, having found out that I was going, so you see, Pard Ashley, that you did more than you counted upon in saving me as you did."

"But I only did what I deemed my duty, Mr. Cody."

"True, duty has a strong claim upon a brave man, and I feel that I have two mighty strong allies here now to help me."

The youths were much pleased to be complimented by Buffalo Bill, who continued:

"Now, I happen to know that Buck Dawson will be very anxious to get through, and will fight if he has any chance of escape, for he is that kind of a man."

"We will head him off, and then, leaving our horses, take passage with him, and give the outlaws a surprise party, I take it."

"You think they will dare remain to hold up the coach after the scare you gave them, sir?" asked Harold.

"Oh, yes! Those fellows are not easily bluffed, and they will watch us out of sight, and feel sure that we have continued on the trail, so will think they have nothing to fear."

"But, I guess they will," observed Leonard.

"I hope so; and they will be all the more anxious to rob the coach after having lost your money."

"I have suspected Doc Driggs and his gang of being outlaws, but could not get a grip on them before."

"But here we are across the valley, and when we are concealed by the pines we will take a look back on the hill and see if they are not watching us."

When wholly out of sight from any one on the hill they had left, Buffalo Bill halted, dismounted, and, seeking a point of observation with the youths, got out his field glass for a look back over the trail.

"There they are! They have picked up their weapons and three of them are watching to see that we continue on across the valley."

"Take a look at them, boys, and then we'll ride for it, as we have no time to lose if we want to head off Buck Dawson's coach."

The youths took a hasty look through the field glass; then the three remounted and went off in a sweeping gallop, Buffalo Bill in the lead, and the recaptured bay horse keeping close up behind him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OVERLAND COACH.

Buffalo Bill had spoken truly when he said it would be a long, sharp and hard ride around the head of the valley to stop the coach upon the trail.

Leading the way, he set a very rapid pace, but the led horse kept well up, and the two boys were close upon the heels of the bay.

The valley was headed without a pause, and the dozen miles gone over in quick time.

Just as Buffalo Bill reached the trail and glanced down at it to see if the fresh wheel marks were there to tell that the coach had gone by, the rumble of wheels was heard.

"He is coming now."

"We are just in time, and nothing to spare."

A few moments after, as the three

stood by their panting horses, the coach came in sight.

The driver half drew rein at sight of them, but, recognizing Buffalo Bill, waved his hat and came on.

He was a large man, with full beard, long hair, and a determined face.

"Ho, Pard Bill, glad to see you, but you gave me a scare."

"Who are the kids?" and the driver drew rein, while the "kids," as he called the two youths, gazed not only with marked interest at him, but also at a passenger he had seated by his side on the box, and which was no less than an enormous black dog, with a most savage cast of countenance.

"Yes, Buck, I am here to head you off."

"Any one with you?"

"My pard, Death Grip, here, that's all."

"I fetched him to kinder help me out, for he's my good luck, as when he's along I generally goes through."

"I believe that is so."

"It is."

"I sets a heap of store by that dog, Pard Bill."

"I know that you do, Buck."

"But I have news for you."

"Good or bad?"

"About even."

"Road-agents were about, and you found 'em?"

"I was riding into an ambush Black Bonnet set for me, when this young man here saved my life, and his pard having been corralled by seven outlaws we got him out of trouble."

"Toes were turned up?"

"One man was killed by this youth, another wounded by him also, and I had to bore a hole in Doc Driggs's left ear, so that was all the blood spilt."

"Well, I'm glad you found 'em, fer that saves me."

"But who is the kids?"

"Two young pards that are out here for reasons they have not told me; but they are game, and are in the game with me to help you through."

"Then there is trouble ahead?"

"Doc Driggs and five of his men are lying in wait for you over the next range across the plain, two miles from here."

"That is bad."

"Not if you take me and my two young pards here for passengers."

"Now, I see how it goes."

"You swung around to head me off, and I guess five of us can wipe out six."

"What five?"

"You, me, the kids and Death Grip."

"Ah, yes; your dog counts as one every time."

"And the kids look in it to stay."

"You can count on them every time."

"Going to leave your horses here?"

"I will put them in a camp a half mile ahead before we go over the range, and come back and get them when it is all over."

"That's so."

"Going inside, Pard Bill?"

"Oh, yes."

"I'll let Death Grip go in with you, for he might git a bullet first thing up here."

"True; and you, Buck?"

"I'm paid ter take chances; ther dog hain't."

"He runs with me fer friendship sake."

"A strong claim, Buck."

"But let us move on and have it over with before sunset."

"Right you are."

"I'm ready."

The scout rode ahead of the coach, the youths followed, and at the foot of the slope they crossed a stream.

Up this a short distance was a good camping place, and here the horses were unsaddled and staked out to rest and feed.

Then the scout and his young pards jumped into the coach, and, leaping down from the box at a word from the driver, Death Grip joined them, taking a front seat.

Savage as he was, he made friends at once, seeing that the youths were his master's friends.

"Jog along across the plain after crossing the slope, Buck, for they will be on the watch for you, and the ambush is at the group of boulders over the ridge."

"I know the place, Pard Bill, for I have been corralled right thar before."

"I know that you have."

"When they halt you, draw rein at once, for they are in an ugly mood, and would shoot quick."

"Have your gun ready, for we will lay low until they are sure you have no passengers and approach the coach."

"I will go out one side with one of my boy pards, and the other with Death Grip out of the other, and I think we can make it lively for Doc Driggs and his gang for a couple of minutes at least."

"The sarpint! I'm sart'in we can."

"Now we'll push on," and the coach rolled on its way to meet what lay in its trail for good or bad.

CHAPTER XII.

LYING IN WAIT.

That Buffalo Bill had known just what Doc Driggs and his followers would do was proven by the fact that they did watch him until he had disappeared from sight with the two boys and the horse he had taken from them.

Their first duty was to get their weapons which he had left in the trail, and then having seen them cross the valley and disappear in the timber over on the ridge, Doc Driggs said:

"Pards, they have gone."

"Bad luck to 'em!"

"The scout is on some duty as courier, I guesses, or he'd a tuk us in when he had us foul."

"I guesses so."

"Jist ter think, he held us up all alone."

"Six of us."

"Yes, but he had help."

"T'other boy, the fellow as kilt Sam and must hev met Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, but he didn't show up, thet boy didn't at first."

"Well, he needn't to, fer we was that scared we thought the scouts were along with ther chief."

"Thet's a bold game Buffalo Bill has of playing."

"Oh, yes, but he's played it once too often for me," growled Doc Driggs, who had been listening in no good humor to the comments of his men.

"I hopes he has, cap'n. But it are lucky for us he didn't think of ther coach coming along and wait until it had."

"Yes, for we'll git that anyhow, and from all I have heard it carries big money this trip."

"We hopes so."

"If it wasn't ter git this coach we'd push right on after Buffalo Bill and them two kids, and have it out, for we is two to one ag'in' 'em."

"Yes, cap'n, we is, only its Buffalo Bill, and I wants more odds than two to one when I goes for his scalp."

"We could git him all right if we faced the music all right, and you bet we'd avenge poor Sam."

"I hope we will some day, cap'n."

"We must, for he knows us all now,

does Buffalo Bill, and you bet we have got ter down him if we wants ter strike it rich from stage coaches, and yer all knows them is a mine as pans out big at times, pard."

"So it does; but we has got ter lay low in camps now, or he'll light down enter us and no mistake when we are least expecting."

"Yes, that's what we'll do."

"I wish we'd been masked."

"What fer, cap'n?"

"So he wouldn't hev seen our faces."

"Lordy, that are funny, cap'n, for he'd a yanked our masks off as he did our weepens."

The "captain" swore at this and said:

"Come, we'll go back and bury Sam, and then lay, for thet coach; but I wants my ear fixed up, fer it hurts."

"I guesses so, for ther hole are clean cut through it," and the men gazed upon their leader with commiseration, at having to wear "Buffalo Bill's mark," as they called it.

They soon returned to the place of ambush, and the chief, after having his wounded ear cared for, sent a man to watch that the scout did not come back over the trail to surprise them, and another to guard the plain for the coming coach.

The others then dug a grave for their dead companion, and he was decently buried, with a few words that Doc Driggs remembered of the burial service, though it seemed a mockery uttered by such vile lips as his.

Rocks were then put upon the grave, the guard that was watching for the return of Buffalo Bill was called in, and no longer had they any fear from that quarter.

The guard watching for the coming coach was, however, kept on post, for from his point of observation he was able to see it over a mile away, when it came into view on the plain.

He had a glass to observe it with, and if there was seen to be a cavalry escort along they knew that they would have to light out very suddenly to save themselves.

But they had little fear of this, as the coaches seldom were escorted by soldiers.

It was therefore without much dread that the outlaws went again into ambush for their prey.

If the coach was not guarded they felt that they were all right.

If it was they would have to skip into hiding and bear their disappointment as best they could.

They were in no pleasant humor at the loss of one of their number, their recognition as a lawless lot by Buffalo Bill, who had cowed them into submission single handed, and taken from them their prisoner, and who was to satiate their vengeful feelings, while in losing him they had also to give up what money they had taken from him.

But they had seen Buffalo Bill and the two boys disappear, had placed their comrade underground, and had hope that the coach would pan out so well for them as to be a salve for their misfortunes thus far.

With this belief they awaited the coming of Buck Dawson's stage, the fact that he might have passengers playing no part with them, as they all knew how little it took to subdue men when under cover of a surprise and a revolver.

At last came the sentinel with his report, and the word was given:

"Ther coach is a-coming, cap'n."

CHAPTER XIII.
THE ATTACK.

Buck Dawson drove leisurely up the trail to the top of the ridge, his face in no way showing that he was in the very face of death.

Sometimes the road-agents were wont to halt a coach by shooting the two horses in the lead.

Then it was done by killing the driver without a word of warning to halt.

Again a volley would be turned upon the driver and coach with no regard as to who might suffer.

All this did Buck Dawson know, yet he did not flinch.

If he was shot from his box without warning, he would die in the discharge of his duty.

What man could die more honorably.

The boulders were beyond his leaders only a short distance, the revolver he intended to use lay by him upon the seat, and he held his reins well in hand.

It seemed that he was driving along careless and unsuspecting of danger.

Instead, however, he was painfully on the alert.

The leaders had reached the rocks, then the spot where Harold Hart had been lassoed.

Had the outlaws taken their departure?

Another step answered the question, for loud came the command:

"Halt, and hands up, if you love life, Buck Dawson!"

The foot of the driver was put hard upon the brake, and the team was reined to a standstill.

Then the hands of Buck Dawson went up above his head.

"What does yer want, yer thieving varmints?" he growled forth.

"You knows," answered a voice from the rocks.

"Still no one appeared.

"Yer'll go as light in pockets as yer is in head if yer expects ter git money from this coach on this run," he said.

"Yer lies, Buck Dawson, and yer knows it, for we hain't no fools not ter be posted."

"Search the old hearse, then, and me, too, if you don't believe me, for I tell yer ag'in yer git nothing."

"I intends to search the coach and you, too, and we'll get a big haul, for I knows what you carry."

"All right, I suppose you have got the force to back up your words."

"I have."

"How many in your gang, Doc Driggs, for I knows yer, so yer might as well skulk out of yer hiding place."

"I have seven."

"Under other circumstances that would be too many fer me to tackle," said Buck Dawson coolly.

"Maybe yer think so.

"Has yer any passengers aboard?"

"Yes, but I guess yer'll hev ter wake 'em up."

"How many?"

"Four of 'em."

"What?"

"Don't get a big scare onter yer, for it's only a' old woman, two kids, and a leetle dog."

"Well, we don't scare a little bit if you had a hearse full of men."

"Come, Doc, talk less and git to work, for my time is too valuable to chin here with you."

"Your time is mine just now, Buck Dawson, but I is in a hurry, too, so come, men, and we'll search him and his passengers along with ther coach."

"Now, git down off of thet box, Buck Dawson."

The driver arose as though to obey, just

as the outlaw leader came into sight on one side and on the other appeared the other three of the band.

Hardly had they done so before three shots were fired as one, and three outlaws dropped in their tracks.

They were the three men on the opposite side to the leader, and who, from the position of the coach, could only be seen by those from within it.

At the same moment the doors flew open upon either side and just then bounded out the huge dog Death Grip, followed by Buffalo Bill and his two boy pards.

But the outlaw leader and the two men with him had not hesitated an instant, but bounded away among the rocks like deer, straight for their horses.

The way they took shielded them from the rifles of Buffalo Bill and the boys, though Buck Dawson got a shot at the one in the rear and sent a bullet through his arm, causing only a slight flesh wound, however.

The man gave a yell of pain as he bounded forward, and then glancing behind him he uttered a cry of mortal terror.

What caused it was the sight of the huge dog upon his track.

The same glance had also shown him a tall form leaping from the coach which he knew but too well, and he shouted:

"It's Buffalo Bill, cap'n!"

This name gave wings to the feet of the outlaw leader and the man running by his side.

He knew just what to expect.

He did not glance behind, but he heard a loud bark, and a yell of terror, followed by the words:

"Oh, pard, save me!"

It was too late, for the dog was upon him, and though the man twice fired upon the savage brute, both times his bullets went wild.

There was heard a fierce yelp, and the dog was upon the back of the fugitive outlaw, his teeth buried in his shoulder.

Loud rang his screams of fright and pain, and as he went down under the weight of the angry dog, Buffalo Bill came flying toward him in hot pursuit, the two boys not very far behind him, while Buck Dawson stood upon his coach shouting in glee at the surprise and terror of the intended coach robbers.

CHAPTER XIV.
THE ESCAPE.

For Buffalo Bill to have gone by the man in the grip of the stage driver's dog and leave him to his fate would have been impossible.

In spite of the wild life he led, his heart was too tender to allow Death Grip to harm the outlaw more than he had done.

By continuing on in his pursuit he knew that he could either bring Doc Driggs and his companion to bay, or kill them.

But he halted at the side of the fallen man and called to the dog to release hold upon him.

But Death Grip deserved the name given to him, and hung on like grim death.

The scout therefore had to give up the pursuit and call to the two boys:

"You push on, pards, and try and capture them."

The horses had been changed from where they had been when Harold Hart was a prisoner, and, having lost sight of the two fugitives, he took the wrong direction.

Thus the outlaw leader and his single

companion were able to reach their horses, throw themselves into their saddles, and dash away in the pines, followed by a few shots at long range from the Boy Pards, who saw too late their mistake.

In the meanwhile Buffalo Bill could not make Death Grip release his hold upon the shoulder of the writhing, frightened man, who was pleading pitifully:

"Take him off! Take him off!"

"I surrender! Don't let him kill me!"

The scout did not wish to harm the dog, but his entreaties and commands for him to let go his hold were useless.

Death Grip still held on.

"Ho, Buck Dawson, come quick and call off your dog, or he'll kill this man!" he shouted.

"Small loss if he does," came the reply.

But the driver called his dog, and the animal reluctantly let go his hold.

Buffalo Bill bent over the man, who was bleeding from Buck's bullet wound and the tear of the dog's teeth, and said:

"If you can walk come with me and I'll see what I can do to help you."

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!" groaned the man, but he struggled to his feet as he uttered the words, giving a wild look at the dog, who was watching him closely.

Supporting the man, Buffalo Bill led him back to the coach and said:

"This man is badly hurt, Buck, and we must do what we can for him."

"Cert, but he had ter take his medicine, as he expected me ter do."

"I'll git my canteen and medicine case, for I allers goes prepared," and springing upon the box Buck Dawson handed down a canteen filled with water and a leather case with lint, medicines, and bandages in it.

"Them fellers don't need no doctoring, Pard Bill," and he pointed to the three dead men.

"No, those boys are dead shots and fired to kill, as I did."

"Them boys is dandies, and no mistake, but they took the wrong trail after Doc Driggs and ther feller with him, so they got away."

"We will hope for better luck next time," said Buffalo Bill, as he washed and dressed the wounds of the outlaw.

"Better luck," groaned the latter.

"This morning there were seven of us, and now Doc Driggs and Scotty are all that is left, save me, and I s'pose I'll hang, if these wounds don't kill me."

"The wounds are not so bad, though painful," said Buffalo Bill, adding:

"If you put your hand in the fire you must expect to get it burnt."

"I has."

"Well, Pard Bill, I'm in luck, for I saved ther boodle, and I owes it to you thet I did."

"And the boys, Buck."

"Yes, I must count 'em in, for they did great."

"Thar they comes now."

As the driver spoke Harold Hart and Leonard Ashley came up, the former calling out:

"We didn't get them, Mr. Cody, I am sorry to say, for I supposed the horses were where they were this morning, so ran in that direction."

"And they had their horses close by, so skipped off before we could get a good shot at them," said Leonard Ashley.

"Let them go, though I should have been glad to have captured Doc Driggs."

"But you have done your duty well, Boy Pards, and four out of six is doing mighty well."

"Now, I think it is doing great, I do, Pard Bill; but what are you going to do with that gerloot thar thet Death Grip were making a supper off of when you made me call him off?"

"I have a pair of steel handcuffs in my pocket, so will put him in irons, and you must carry him on to the fort at the end of your run, Buck."

"I'll do it."

"But ther stiff?"

"Take the dead with you, also, for we cannot bury them, and report to the colonel just what occurred."

"I'll do it."

"But say, Pard Bill."

"Yes, Buck."

"Them stiff will make a real hearse of my coach."

"You do not care for that."

"Now, I doesn't like it, for I hain't stuck on dead folks, a little bit."

"They are harmless, Buck, so keep your eye upon the live one, for he may give you trouble."

"He'd better not, or I'll carry into the fort four stiff instead of three," was the significant reply of the driver.

CHAPTER XV.

A STRIKING RESEMBLANCE.

The wounds of the prisoner having been cared for by Buffalo Bill, irons were slipped upon his wrists and he was aided to climb upon the box, where Buck Dawson said he wished to have him.

Then the three dead bodies were placed in the coach, and the four horses left by Doc Driggs in his flight were led up and fastened behind the coach to be led.

"I say, pard, hain't I seen you before?" asked the driver, eying Harold Hart with great intentness.

"I think not before to-day, sir."

"Well, I has, or I know'd somebody as you favors wonderful."

"It must have been some one I favor, for I was never up in this part of the country before."

The driver seemed puzzled, and was lost in deep thought.

Suddenly his face lighted up and he said:

"I has it now who yer favors."

"Say, Pard Bill, does yer know thet mail rider for the string of mountain mining camps thet disappeared so sudden, and all said he ran off with the mail bags 'cause they had so much money in 'em?"

"Yes, I remember the man they called the Midnight Mail Rider, because he always rode his run by night, if he is the one you refer to."

"He is, and his name was Hart."

"Yes, and he always had a dog with him that he called Scout, and that there Death Grip is ther brother of thet same dog, for he had two of 'em as like as two guns, and would take one on one ride, tother on the next, and so on, and he did ther same with his ponies."

"Yes, I remember the man well, but I never believed that he was guilty of robbing the mail, for he did not seem that kind of a fellow."

"You are right, Pard Bill, he didn't, and he wasn't, fer I know'd him well, and more than once he saved me and my coach from ther road-agents."

"Hart were a square man clean through, and it were him that this young feller is ther living picter of."

"You are right, Buck, the youth is strangely like the Midnight Mail Rider," replied Buffalo Bill, gazing at the youth.

The face of Harold Hart had flushed and paled by turns, as he heard what the driver had said.

His comrade had glanced at him and said something in a low tone which neither the driver nor Buffalo Bill had caught.

Now the youth asked with some degree of excitement:

"What did you say his name was?"

"Hart is what he called himself, though out here, Boy Pard, a man don't go under ther name he did East exceptin' in mighty rare cases, but I thinks it were his real name."

"When did you see him last, sir?"

"Three year ago."

"Where?"

"He was ther mail rider of the mountain mining camps, and had a run of fifty miles which he took twice a week each way."

"Is he not riding now?"

"No, for he hev been missing fer three year."

"Missing?"

"Well, I calls it so, for somehow I can't believe he is dead, any more than I can that he robbed ther mail."

"He was accused of robbing the mail, then?"

"Yes, there are them as says he got big money out of ther bags and skipped."

"Three years ago?"

"About thet."

"And he has not been seen since?"

"No."

"You do not believe he is dead?"

"I does not."

"What has become of him, in your opinion, sir?"

"I thinks the Indians captured him and holds him a captive, or maybe the road-agents, and then again he might have been kilt by one or tother."

"Did they have no proof of his being alive or dead?"

"His horse came in one afternoon, jist as a band was going out to search for him, for he was due at daybreak."

"Ther horse seemed dead beat, and there was blood on ther saddle."

"Ah!"

"Then his dog was missing also, the twin to Death Grip here, and ther mail bags was gone, and that is all we have ever know'd of ther fate of poor Hart, ther Midnight Mail Rider."

Buffalo Bill was watching the youth as he questioned the driver, and he saw more in all that was asked and answered than did Buck Dawson.

The scout felt sure that the youth knew the man whom all knew as the Midnight Mail Rider.

He recalled now the story of the missing man.

How he had been a miner, but an unfortunate one in striking paying dirt, and had volunteered to ride the mail when big money had been offered to carry the bags through the run of the mining camps, a ride that was considered an almost fatal one, sooner or later.

The scout recalled also that the mail rider had been famous as the possessor of two splendid horses and a couple of large, savage dogs, one or the other of which went with him on each ride.

Then he had suddenly disappeared, and it was said by many that he had skipped off with the mail, which was most valuable on that last ride.

So Buffalo Bill was not surprised when the youth said:

"Hart is my name, and I feel sure that the one you speak of is my father."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SURE-SHOT BOYS' MISSION.

The words of Harold Hart caused Buck Dawson to spring toward him, and grasping his hand he cried:

"You is right!"

"Now I knows yer, fer you is ther image of yer father, and I can swear you is the son of ther Midnight Mail Rider."

"Boy, I is yer friend fer yer father's sake, for I loved him as I did a brother."

Harold Hart was touched by the earnest manner and kind words of the stage driver, and replied:

"We will be friends, sir, and let me tell you now, as I intended to tell Mr. Cody here when we camped, that I came out here to find my father."

"And I came to be his friend, come what might," said Leonard Ashley.

"And a true, good friend he has been, for he left a comfortable home and those dear to him to come with me."

"Once my father was a rich man, a Texas planter, but he was robbed of his wealth and had to take me from college, while he accepted a position as chief herder on the ranch of the father of my friend here."

"It was not long after before a murder was committed, the victim being the man who had ruined my father."

"Circumstantial evidence pointed to my father as being the murderer, so he was arrested, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged."

"Len, my pard here, and I aided him to escape from prison, boys though we were, and I was given my father's position on the Ashley ranch."

"But I was confident of the innocence of my father, and I set to work to prove him not guilty."

"Two months ago I did so, and then I decided, when the real murderer was known and my father's innocence proven, to set out and find him, to clear his name of the stain upon it."

"I had only heard from him once each year, for he feared to write me, and the last letter came from these mountain mines."

"So here I decided to come, and Len Ashley came with me."

"But now you tell me that my father has another cloud cast upon his name, that he is not here, and may be dead."

"No, no, there is no dishonor upon him, though he may be dead."

The boy's voice quivered as he spoke, and both Buffalo Bill and Buck Dawson held out their hands and grasped his in warm sympathy.

At this the boy raised his head and said earnestly:

"Yes, dead he may be, but he is no mail robber, no fugitive with stolen booty."

"But, I swear to you both that, dead or alive, I shall find him, know the truth, and clear his name of this last charge, as I did of the one of murder."

"Bravo, my boy, and mark my words, you will do it, for you have it in you to do so," cried Buffalo Bill, and then he quickly added:

"And let me say right now that I will help you to find your father or know what his fate has been."

"I want two just such pards as you are, boys though you may be in years, and I will call you my Boy Sure-Shots, and we travel the same trail, for yours is a noble mission, Harold Hart, and I have seen you both tried and found true."

"Thet's ther music ter sing, Pard Bill, and I'll be with you in your hunt, so call on me for my steel, lead, or gold, as you may need it," Buck Dawson said.

Both Harold Hart and Leonard Ashley were much pleased at the words of Buffalo Bill and Buck Dawson, for that the latter was the scout's friend and had been the firm pard of the mail rider, as Mr. Hart had become, was enough recommendation for the two lads.

"Well, Boy Pard, does you go on with me ter the fort, or will yer remain with Chief of Scouts Cody, for it is getting late, and I has ter drive pretty fast ter make up ther time I has lost, and maybe I shouldn't say lost nuther, when I saved my life, I guess, and ther boodle too by ther delay."

The boys looked at each other and then at Buffalo Bill, to see what he would say.

He answered promptly:

"I will keep my Sure-Shot Boy Pard with me, Buck, for I guess they are willing to follow my lead."

"Indeed, yes," said Harold Hart, while Leonard Ashley responded:

"You say and we'll do, sir."

"Yes, that's the way to talk," put in the driver.

"Follow Buffalo Bill's lead and you strike the right trail."

"And, Buck," said Buffalo Bill, glancing at the outlaw prisoner, who had been too far off to hear what had been said:

"It will be best not to let it be known who the boys are, that Harold Hart is the son of the Midnight Mail Rider, for it may help us in our effort to know about his fate not to let the miners discover that this youth is here looking him up."

"You are right, Pard Bill."

"You see, Buck, I have my own ideas about the fate of the mail rider, and if I am right those who may know about him would be put on their guard if the old story is revived again."

"Right you are, Pard Bill, so we'll say nothing and leave all to you; but don't you forgit that Doc Driggs, the man who led the outlaws, and his close pard, Nugget Ned, escaped, and they are a bad pair to have at large."

"I have not forgotten them, Buck, nor shall I do so," quietly responded Buffalo Bill.

But his words meant a great deal to the driver, who knew him well.

"Well, Pard Bill, I'll git along on my way, for night hain't far off, so I'll jist say good-by and set ther team agoing, with a graveyard fruit inside, and a cuss on ther box with me thet ought ter be hanged."

"But I has jist this ter say afore I go, and that is thet I tuk ther belongings of Mail Rider Hart when he didn't git back, and I has his two horses ter-day, some traps as were in his cabin, along with some papers as may be important, and this dog, and you bet I tarns Death Grip over now to ther boy, and he'll find him useful as I has."

"Come, Death Grip, go with yer young boss now, for yer belongs ter him—that's him right thar," and the driver pointed to Harold Hart.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SILENT SENTINEL.

The faithful dog seemed to have the intelligence of a human being, for he walked directly over to Harold Hart, wagging his tail as he did so.

The boy bent over and caressed him, saying in a low tone:

"Good old dog."

"We'll find your master yet, won't we?"

The dog rubbed his head against the cheek of the youth, while Buck Dawson said:

"I believe he knows who yer is, fer thet dog understands what many humans cannot."

"Yer see, yer looks so tarnally like yer pa, and yer voice is jist like his, so ther dog knows as well as if he'd talked it over with yer, as has Pard Bill here and myself."

"He does seem to take a great liking to you, Boy Pard, and if he will go with you we will find him most useful, for he used to go on the run once each week with your father, you know, and so knows his exact trail, for I do not believe he has forgotten it."

"He knows, I'll gamble on it," said Buck Dawson.

"And, Buck, let me ask you to drive out as your leaders, on your way back, the two horses that used to be ridden by the Midnight Mail Rider, and the boys here will change theirs for them, for we'll meet you on the trail somewhere."

"I'll do it, and you bet, Pard Bill, you is striking the right trail to find ther boy's father, or my name hain't Buck Dawson."

"I hope so, pard."

"But, now, good-by, and, Boy Pard, see if the dog will follow you."

With a grasp of the driver's hand in farewell, Harold Hart turned away, calling to the dog.

Death Grip looked at him, then at Buck Dawson, ran to the latter, licked his hand, and at a word from his old master ran after the youth.

The latter patted him affectionately, while Buck, closing his stage doors, mounted to his box, by the side of his prisoner, and with a word to his team drove on, calling back:

"I guess I won't fergit this spot, pards."

"Be a good dog, Death Grip, for I is betting big money on yer."

The dog wagged his tail, but remained by the side of Harold Hart, who made no effort to keep him, should he show an inclination to follow on after the coach.

"He's all right, boys."

"Buck is right, for the dog is next to human in his intelligence; has more sense, in fact, than many men I know."

"But now let us strike the back trail for the camp where we left our horses."

With this the scout led the way back over the stage trail, and the boys followed at a brisk pace, for Buffalo Bill was a good walker.

Death Grip followed, keeping close to the side of Harold Hart, who seemed much pleased with his companionship.

Down the slope they went, across the plain, and over the next ridge, to the camp where the horses had been left.

The animals were found just as they had been left, and in a short while a fire was blazing brightly, blankets were spread, and Buffalo Bill was getting supper, a performance all were much interested in, even to Death Grip, for he watched the scout's every move as though calculating the minutes before he would come in for his share.

The horses had rested well from their long, hard ride of the afternoon, and were put upon fresh grazing grounds for the night.

Supper over and Death Grip well fed, the latter had been put upon guard for the night, all knowing that no human sentinel was needed with such a good watch as Buck Dawson had said they would find the faithful dog to be.

It was after a long talk together that the three pards turned in for the night.

Buffalo Bill had learned fully the history of his young friends, and had asked many questions about Mr. Hart, the Midnight Mail Rider, to try and find some clue other than his having been killed, to account for his strange disappearance.

"We will find him, Boy Pards, or know what his fate really was, if dead," the scout had said cheerily, as he led the way to his blankets.

For awhile Buffalo Bill lay awake, unable to sleep, for his mind was busy plotting for the finding of the lost mail rider.

At last he dropped to sleep, but after an hour or so he awoke with a start.

He knew that something had awakened him out of the usual run.

The fire had burned low, it was about midnight, and yet there was light enough for him to see some form creeping toward the spot where Harold Hart was sleeping.

Instantly his hand sought his revolver, for he now detected, as he believed, that it was a huge mountain lion.

But quickly it came to him what it was.

He had forgotten about Death Grip momentarily upon awakening.

It was the dumb sentinel, and he went up to the boy and put his cold nose close to his face, at the same time giving a very low whine to rouse him.

"There is danger about," said the scout, and he called in a whisper:

"Boy Pard!"

"Ay, ay, Mr. Cody, I am awake," was the low response of the boy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIMELY WARNING.

Harold Hart was awake. He had not gone to sleep, for his mind was busy with all he had heard from Buffalo Bill and Buck Dawson about his father's uncertain fate.

The dutiful son had cleared his father's name of the charge of murder, after having aided him to escape from the gallows by getting him out of prison.

He had come to the northwest, accompanied by his faithful pard, Leonard Ashley, to find his father and tell him of the good news he had for him in having proven him not guilty, while he had also to let him know that the estate had been found not to be so badly wrecked as was thought by the dishonest partner of Mr. Hart, so there was a snug little balance left for him to use as the foundation for building up another fortune.

That he had learned what he did about his father's supposed fate was a crushing blow to Harold Hart, and he lay awake thinking about it all long after he had retired to his blankets.

"Well, I have found some good friends here in Buffalo Bill and Buck Dawson. I still have Len Ashley, and more, a new pard in my father's dog, Death Grip, so I —"

He paused in his musing, for he distinctly saw something within the firelight, his blanket, and those of the others having been spread off in the shadow.

"Why, it is Death Grip," he said, and he watched the dog as he came toward him, sniffed the air, and then once more moved cautiously on, halting right by him.

Pretending to be asleep, he let the dog rub his nose against his face, then he uttered a low whine, and Buffalo Bill spoke:

"There is sure danger abroad, and the dog has come to warn you."

"His instinct is certainly remarkable," said the scout.

"What danger can it be, sir," asked Harold.

"Indians, perhaps, or it may be Doc Briggs and Scotty trying to run off our horses and get a shot at us."

"I will wake up Len, sir."

"Yes, and we will slip out from the firelight, and I will follow Death Grip, while you and your pard remain here."

"The dog will show me what the trouble is."

Len Ashley was awakened, and the scout said in a whisper:

"What is it, good dog?"

"Go and find them and I will come."

The dog started off, saw the scout following, looked back at his young master, but was told to go on and obeyed.

The scout followed close, and through the timber, Death Grip leading him, toward the plain where the horses were feeding.

Then the dog stopped, and Buffalo Bill began to reconnoitre.

He had not long to wait before he saw several forms skulking slowly along.

They were making for the little camp-fire.

"One, two, three, four, five," the scout counted, and these were increasing.

"Indians, and a dozen of them, if not more," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he lay in hiding behind a fallen tree, the dog close by his side, and silent as a ghost.

The Indians halted not a hundred feet away, held a whispered conference, and moved closer to the camp.

"I cannot warn the boys, so must risk their discovering the redskins."

"They are creeping up to fire upon us asleep, as they believe, and one of them has already reconnoitred the camp and reported; yes it was that which aroused the dog."

"If I fire on them now they will not stampede, but fight, but if the boys see them and open, then I can be of a great deal of service here where I am, and the surprise we give them will be worth much to us."

So mused the scout, and he counted just fifteen braves as they skulked toward the camp.

He felt anxious for his Boy Sure-Shots, yet he did not feel that he should fire on the Indians then to put them on their guard.

It would put the redskins against them with considerable advantage.

With his repeating rifle ready, Buffalo Bill crouched behind the fallen tree and waited.

At length the stalking, silent forms passed one by one between the firelight and the scout.

He counted them again.

"Fifteen."

"That means there are more, ready to rush upon the horses when the attack is made upon the camp."

"Can the boys have gone asleep again?"

"No, that is not their style, for —"

The scout's musings were suddenly ended by the shooting forth of two red flames from beyond the firelight, and the ring of two rifles, then of another louder shot.

The scout knew that one of the boys carried a carbine, the other a combined rifle and shotgun, a rifle and smooth-bore barrel.

The three shots had been fired, first

the rifles, and each dropped a brave, and then the shotgun barrel, loaded with buckshot, had been emptied into the crowd.

The Indians had just discharged a shower of arrows into the three blanket rolls where they supposed their foes lay asleep.

But the fire of the Boy Sure-Shots from another place, the killing of two of their braves, and wounding of several by the buckshot, was a complete surprise to them.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BATTLE IN THE DARK.

The very instant after the three shots from the two boys Buffalo Bill opened with his repeating rifle directly upon the group of Indians.

In the darkness of course he fired at random.

But he had seen the redskins crouching down not very far from the fire, and he had noted the spot from whence the shots had come, so placed the exact locality of the young Sure-Shots.

Half a dozen shots rang out from his rifle in quick succession, and the Indians were taken aback by the discovery of a foe in a new place, and as they knew nothing of repeating rifles then, they supposed that each shot meant a pale face enemy.

At this they turned to stampede, for the shots of the scout, at random though they were, killed a brave and slightly wounded another.

Feeling assured that the Indians would not stand to fight after their surprise, Buffalo Bill left the Boy Sure-Shots to work out their own salvation while he bounded toward the horses to protect them.

Death Grip was at his heels.

The scout and the dog were just in time, for several forms were seen running toward the horses to pull up their stake ropes and get away with them.

Death Grip was not a noisy dog.

He did not bluster and give warning of what he intended to do.

He simply did his duty in his quick, quiet way.

The redskins were before him, rushing from the timber to the horses.

Away he bounded after them.

The scout saw them indistinctly in the darkness, and halting at the edge of the timber he raised his rifle.

Then came the report, and that was a death-knell to a brave.

The others bounded forward the more rapidly.

They must reach those horses.

But again that fatal repeating rifle sent a messenger of doom upon its way just as there was heard in the timber the rapid rattle of revolvers.

"The Boy Sure-Shots are at it," cried Buffalo Bill, and he uttered his wild war-cry, so well known by the Indians.

It was answered by the "Texas yell" from the boys, and the flashing of the revolvers in the timber showed that the Sure-Shots were pressing on after the retreating Indians.

But the redskins after the horses were still rushing on, when suddenly there rang out a cry of terror, of pain, of horror so wild and terrible that it fairly startled Buffalo Bill for the moment.

He was quick to recognize, however, what it was, and as he saw the Indians wheel in their run toward the horses and dash away in a mad stampede, he cried:

"Death Grip has downed a brave!"

Rapidly he ran toward the spot, where he saw a man writhing upon the ground.

It was a struggle for life, for a brave was in the grip of the dog.

As the scout reached the spot Death Grip relaxed his hold and looked up.

He seemed to say:

"I've got in some of my fine work, too."

"Look at him!"

Buffalo Bill did look at him.

He was dead, and the dog was not hurt.

"You are a terror, Death Grip."

"I guess that redskin thought the Evil Spirit had him when you sprung upon him."

Then Buffalo Bill gave his wild halloo, and it was promptly answered by the two young Sure-Shots in the timber, while the dog, for the first time, gave vent to a loud, long bark, to show his appreciation of the victory won against odds.

But Buffalo Bill was not yet satisfied.

He had seen that the Indians had come from the direction that he had, and when they ran off they had started toward another point to enter the timber.

This convinced him that they had left their ponies somewhere between the two points.

"Come, old dog," he cried, and bounded away toward the timber midway between where he had left it and the Indians had made for in their flight.

Death Grip was in advance in the run, and as he entered the timber he gave a loud bark.

"I thought so," said Buffalo Bill.

"They are there! but I will risk it."

Dashing into the timber he came upon a small herd of ponies.

There were Indians there, too, trying to cut them loose, mount, and get off with them.

But a cry of agony from one showed that Death Grip had already gotten hold of one, and a shot from the scout's revolver brought down another.

Once more he uttered his war-cry, just as three of the braves dashed away mounted.

But the remainder of the herd, though plunging with excitement and fright, did not break loose, and remained.

Again did the scout run to call off Death Grip from his prey.

He was too late, for the dog had done his deadly work only too surely.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FLIGHT.

"Well, Death Grip, I do not know what to say about you," said Buffalo Bill, as he saw the dog standing over the body of the redskin he had killed.

It was dark there in the timber, but yet the scout could see that there were over a score of ponies there.

He called out soothingly to calm them, and then, as they quieted down, shouted:

"Ho, young Sure-Shots, where are you?"

There was a dead silence in the timber toward the camp, and he was sure that the Indians had stampeded in their terror, or they would have already have come for their ponies.

Determined to guard the animals at all hazards, he took his stand at the edge of the timber, where he could watch his own horses, and left Death Grip on duty near the Indian ponies.

Had the Boy Sure-Shots escaped, however, without a wound, or worse still, had either or both of them been killed?

The silence seemed ominous to the scout.

Still he knew that when certain the redskins had fled far away he could put Death Grip upon the trail and find the boys, dead or alive—unless they had been captured.

Buffalo Bill knew that in the open, where his horses had been feeding, lay three dead braves, two fallen by his rifle and one killed by the dog.

He knew that in the timber among the Indian ponies lay two other redskins dead, one brought down by a bullet, the other dragged to his death by Death Grip.

Up by the camp others dead were to be found, and if the Indians knew just what the force of palefaces would they not risk much to get revenge and recapture their ponies?

The scout felt sure that they would.

He was anxious then to collect his forces and get away, if he could do so, as quickly as possible.

Once more he called out to the boys.

To his great relief there came a quick answer:

"Ay, ay, sir, we are packing up to skip, for they'll be back."

"Either of you hurt?"

"Not to speak of, sir."

"Are you?"

"No."

"Where is Death Grip?"

"With me, and he is proud of his work."

"Bring the camp outfit here, for I'll get the horses, and I have the Indian pony herd, save those who escaped."

"We're coming, sir."

"Those boys know their business," said the scout as he walked rapidly toward where their four horses were staked out.

The three saddle animals were quickly ready, and with the bay were led back to the timber, where the boys had arrived bearing their blankets and camp outfit with them.

They were quickly strapped upon the bay, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"Now, we'll be off—hark! They are upon us!"

"Surround the ponies and drive them up the valley, while I meet them with a few shots."

The Indians were returning at a run to get the ponies, not believing they had been found.

Stampeded at first in real fright, they had soon come to the conclusion that there were but three or four white foes, and they halted in their flight, held a pow-wow, and started on the back trail to get revenge and all else that came their way.

As they found the whites were in the timber where their ponies had been left, they held a hasty council and then came on with a rush, just as the Boy Sure-Shots drove the herd out into the open and up the valley.

A shower of arrows was fired into the timber as they came on, the most terrific yells were uttered, and the few braves who had firearms discharged them at random.

"Good luck, for all missed me," muttered Buffalo Bill, and, bringing his rifle to his shoulder, he rattled forth shot after shot until seventeen bullets had been sent upon errands of death by the matchless weapon.

Leaping into his saddle then, and uttering his cry of defiance, the scout darted away at full speed.

Death Grip had gone with his master, and he was found to be a good horse wrangler in turning refractory ponies back into the trail.

The fire of the scout had checked the redskin charge and made them seek shelter behind the trees.

But they beheld Buffalo Bill dash away, and with yells of fury rushed forward once more.

Gaining the edge of the timber they saw the scout far away, and beyond their reach was the herd of ponies.

They had made their attempt to surprise the camp, had been foiled by the watchful dog sentinel, and beaten at all points, dismounted, and in a wood range they were left to mourn the death of a number of their comrades and register silent vows for future revenge.

As he caught up with the Sure-Shots driving the ponies, Buffalo Bill said:

"It was the Chief Black Bonnet's band, and they are as bad a lot as their leader; but, all counted, they have lost heavily in the last twenty-four hours, yet will be that much more revengeful."

"Now, for Stock-Tender Barton's stage station to leave these ponies."

CHAPTER XXI.

A CALL FOR HELP.

Stock-Tender Barton's stage station was reached before dawn, and he and his comrades were aroused by Buffalo Bill and the herd of twenty-seven captured ponies were put into the corral.

"Barton, you must mount your best horse and ride for the fort with all speed, for three Indians got away mounted and followed us here, beyond a doubt, so have sent word to the others on foot, and you may be sure they are now on our trail."

"I will send a line by you to the colonel, and my Boy Sure-Shots here, your companions, and I will hold the station until help comes."

"All right, Chief Cody, I will be mounted within five minutes," replied Barton, and by the firelight in the stock-tender's cabin Buffalo Bill hastily wrote:

"To Colonel Cameron,

"Commanding River Fort.

"Sir:

"I have to report that Chief Black Bonnet's pretended friendship was a fraud, for he ambushed me with two warriors and would have killed me but for a youth by the name of Ashley, who, with a comrade, is on a mission to the mines."

"Ashley and I killed Black Bonnet and his two braves, then got Buck Dawson and his coach out of trouble with road-agents, five of whom were killed, two alone escaping, one being the leader."

"The youths, whom I call my Boy Sure-Shots, then took the trail with me, were tracked by Black Bonnet's band of thirty Indians, while in camp."

"We thinned out the number, captured twenty-seven of their ponies, but three escaped mounted, and I feel assured dogged me to where we now are, at Barton's stage station, where the dismounted warriors will doubtless attack us by noon, or sooner, perhaps."

"I therefore respectfully ask for a cavalry force to come to our aid, and if we are besieged they can hear the firing and corral the whole lot."

"Pardon me, if I suggest a larger force being sent northward on a scout, as Black Bonnet's band may have some support."

"I have the honor to be, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"W. F. CODY,

"Chief of Scouts."

This letter was sent by Barton, who went off like the wind, to get it to the

fort with all speed, though he had a ride of over thirty miles to make.

Having seen that all the horses were safely corralled, and all made ready for an attack, Buffalo Bill and the boys lay down to get much-needed rest. Death Grip having already set them the example, as he deemed his duty as sentinel at an end.

Jim Barton was left on duty, and a good plainsman, he scouted around the station, and just as dawn broke saw an Indian on foot skulking back over the trail.

He half raised his rifle, but lowered it again with the remark:

"I could plug him, but I'll let him go and report, they don't expect our being ready for them."

"Buffalo Bill is right, though, in saying it is Black Bonnet's band, for that brave had the black feather head-dress that chief warriors all wear."

"And yet Chief Black Bonnet passed our station two days ago and told us that he had come to love his white brothers, and Colonel Cameron and his soldiers all believed him, only Buffalo Bill did not, and he was right."

"I tell you he knows about Indians from heel to scalp."

With this tribute to the great scout, Jim Barton retraced his way to the fort muttering:

"We are going to catch it, and within a few hours."

"I hope Brother George will lead the soldiers back at a run, for somehow I believe Black Bonnet's band have more reds near."

Returning to his station, the stock-tender set to work to prepare a good breakfast, allowing the scout and boys to sleep up to the last moment, knowing well they needed it.

He was sorry the horses had to be penned up in the corral, but it was better to have them go hungry for awhile than to be turned out to feed and be captured.

When Jim Barton at last called his visitors he had breakfast ready, and he told them of his having seen the Indian ride away.

"All right, we'll be ready for them when they come."

"I have had a good rest, a nice breakfast, and feel in a fighting mood, and I believe you also do, Boy Pard."

"They said they did and they certainly looked it."

Then Buffalo Bill took his rifle and with a cheering word started out on foot to reconnoitre.

He had a consciousness that danger was not far off.

At the station all was ready for the fight, and as the stock-tenders were well supplied with arms and ammunition, they could make a good defense against big odds, for the cabin was strongly built, had a flat roof with a breastwork of logs on top, and the corral fence was high and built of heavy timber.

About half an hour after Buffalo Bill's departure he returned quickly and called out:

"We are in for it, pard, for they are coming, and, as I feared, the band of Black Bonnet has been reinforced by half a hundred more braves, and the dismounted gang are riding behind the others."

"They have come to get their ponies, and we have got to fight for it, that is all."

"All right, let them come," said Harold Hart, and Len Ashley, was feeling the same way and said so.

CHAPTER XXII.
THE STAND-OFF.

There was no flinching in the four comrades, who felt that it was to be a bitter fight for them against very heavy odds.

Buffalo Bill did not hide the situation, and the two Boy Sure-Shots did not show any weakening at what was before them.

It was critical, as four men had to fight four-score braves, and the latter rendered desperate by the loss of their chief and their companions slain the night before.

There was no backing down in the defenders, and Buffalo Bill placed his comrades in the positions he deemed best.

One thing was in their favor, and this was that the Indians did not believe their coming was known.

It was their belief that they would surprise the stock-tenders, and recapture their ponies, along with the stage horses there, and get the scalps of the two Barton brothers, whom they knew were in charge.

They had tracked their ponies there, and supposed that Buffalo Bill and his two Boy Pardes had left them there and then gone their way.

In this the scout knew that he had the advantage of a surprise for the redskins that would amount to a great deal.

So the Indians dismounted out of sight of the station half of their force, and left the others to follow on horseback.

They crept cautiously forward, and when they got into the open space, free of the timber, saw no sign of the stock-tenders.

All seemed quiet there, and the stock-tenders were not apparently on the alert.

As they left the timber, some forty in number, and stooped in form and with light step, approached the stockade, Buffalo Bill and his three companions were watching them, while Death Grip, unable to see, was anxiously waiting for another chance to show what he could do.

The Indians pressed nearer and nearer, wholly unsuspecting a surprise where they expected to catch the stock-tenders off their guard.

To the edge of the timber came the mounted braves, awaiting to charge when their dismounted force reached the stockade.

Buffalo Bill had the two boys on one side of him and Jim Barton on the other.

All the weapons in the stockade had been brought to that side, ready for use, and there were rifles enough to give each defender a couple.

Then there were half a dozen extra revolvers.

Nearer and nearer came the red line until but a hundred yards away.

"Pick your men, aim true, and—

"Fire!"

With the command of the scout came the flash of the four rifles.

Then followed the louder shotgun barrel of Len Ashley's combined weapon, and with the constant rattle of Buffalo Bill's deadly repeating rifle were heard the reports of the others that had been hastily seized by the defenders.

The result was a terrible surprise to the Indians, and the rain of lead upon them was most demoralizing to one and all, especially as half a dozen fell under the fire and others were wounded.

In their stampede on foot the cry came for the mounted braves to charge, and at once revolvers were turned upon the red horsemen.

But they could not face the fire of the deadly marksmen, and quickly retreated to the cover of the timber.

"They will hold a war talk now and send for reinforcements, if they have any near.

"Then they will surround us and attack later on every side.

"If help comes from the fort we are all right."

"I hope it will come, Chief Cody," said Jim Barton, but the two Boy Sure-Shots said nothing.

Then several hours passed away, and not a redskin was visible all the while.

Noon passed, the defenders had dinner, and then Buffalo Bill called out:

"Each man to his post!

"See there!"

All saw that the Indians were mounted and coming to the edge of the timber.

And more, they were now advancing from every side, while a single glance was sufficient to show that they had been reinforced to more than treble their force.

"It is as I feared, they had help near," coolly said the scout.

"And where is our help?" asked Jim Barton.

"Coming.

"But be ready, all, for this will be the fight of our lives."

The scout's voice was stern now and rang like a bugle call.

He was nerved for the desperate combat.

With wildest yells the redskins now rode out of the timber into full view, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"They have found the body of their chief, boys, which we put on the rock, for that fellow on the white horse is wearing his magnificent black war-bonnet.

"I will try him at long range, but no one else fire until I give the word."

Then Buffalo Bill ran his eyes along the sights, his rifle cracked, and the chief on the white horse, who had been made leader in the place of Black Bonnet fell from his saddle, amid a demoniacal chorus of yells from the two hundred braves.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FIRST STEP TAKEN.

The splendid shot of the scout was greeted with cheers by his comrades, and each one nerved himself to face the deadly ordeal.

Their faces were pale, yes, but there was no wavering, and, glancing across the roof at the two youths, Buffalo Bill cried:

"Bravo, my Boy Sure-Shots!

"You are made of the right stuff, and if you have to die you'll face death gamely."

As the words were uttered the braves set their ponies into a run.

But suddenly, like a burst of thunder from a clear sky, came a deep roar, a whirring sound followed, then a shell burst in the midst of the mass of red horsemen.

They were dazed by the shot, for the shell came from a hill a mile away that looked down upon the stockade station.

A twelve-pounder piece of artillery had been taken there, and gotten into position.

The soldiers had arrived.

Barton had done his work well.

Dismayed by the heavy roar of the gun and the shrieking, bursting shell,

the Indians knew not which way to turn.

But in the moment of their hesitation there was heard a cheer from a hundred cavalymen, and out of the timber in the direction from whence had come the gun fire dashed two troops, with revolver in one hand, sword in the other.

There was no resisting that mad charge.

The gun had startled the redskins, and they had been surprised completely.

The charging troopers doubled up their line, spread out in a circle as they were nearing upon the stockade, and they dashed for shelter at mad speed.

Not a shot came from the stockade.

"Don't fire on them now—the poor fellows are whipped," Buffalo Bill had said, and he descended from the cabin roof to meet the officer in command.

"Ho, Cody, glad to find you all right, for I feared we would be too late, and your scouts reported several fairly large trails of redskins moving this way.

"The colonel took your suggestion and sent a large force, and it is well he did, for we have some three hundred Indians to fight.

"I've got them going now, so will drive them to their villages.

"Who are these good-looking young fellows there?" and Major Timpson nodded toward the two youths.

"I call them my Boy Sure-Shots, major, and they are dandies.

"They are from Texas, and up here searching for a friend in the mines.

"May I introduce them, sir?"

"Certainly, for Barton spoke of them, and I admire their pluck and like their looks."

Harold Hart and Leonard Ashley were called up and presented to the major, who cordially greeted them, and asked them to go with him in the pursuit.

Mounting their horses, and accompanying Buffalo Bill, they were glad to do so, and they had a good opportunity to see what a cavalry charge of redskins was.

When the soldiers went into camp that night, as Major Timpson had five troops of cavalry and four guns, and could drive all the redskins back to their village, Buffalo Bill decided to leave Texas Jack in charge of his company of scouts, to continue the chase, and return with his Boy Sure-Shots to the stage trail to meet Buck Dawson on his run back.

He had promised to help Harold Hart discover the fate of his father, and he was anxious to lose no time about it, for he well knew how desirous the youth was, since he had heard Buck's story, to know the truth.

So the trio left the camp the next morning early, and while the soldiers pushed on after the Indians, Buffalo Bill and his Boy Sure-Shots went on their way to head off Buck Dawson upon his return.

That night they went into camp just where they had been attacked by the Indian band, and Death Grip was the guard, as before, only the scout did not expect any trouble then, with the redskins in full flight to their villages.

They had gathered up their dead left there and taken them with them, as is their custom.

The horses were staked out, and, having replenished his supplies from the major's commissary, the scout and his young comrades had a most excellent supper, and were well provisioned for a week ahead.

The next morning, the night having passed without any alarm, they broke camp and rode toward the range to meet the stage.

Buck Dawson was on time, for the rumble of his coach wheels was heard soon after they reached the scene where Harold Hart had so nearly lost his life at the rope end.

In a few minutes more the coach came in sight, and, as it drew rein at sight of Buffalo Bill and his pards, Buck Dawson called out:

"You bet yer sweet life, pards, I is glad ter see yer, fer I has got some passengers in the old hearse I wants yer ter hold up fer keeps."

At the voice of the driver two heads appeared at each of the coach windows.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUCK DAWSON'S FOUR PASSENGERS.

The words of Buck Dawson were a warning that Buffalo Bill acted upon at once.

He knew that the driver had some one in the coach whom he had reason to fear, and he called out in his deep tones:

"Ay, ay, Buck! They are the ones my Sure-Shots and I are after. We'll riddle the coach if they make a muss."

The men had drawn back at sight of Buffalo Bill.

Would they submit or fight, was the question.

The scout did not allow them much time to make up their minds, for he cried in a commanding way:

"Sure-Shots, be ready to fire!

"If my orders are not obeyed by these men in the coach, I'll give the order to fire, and every man of you turn loose upon them."

"Ay, ay, chief!" called out Harold Hart; "the men have the coach covered, sir!"

At this Buffalo Bill stepped toward the coach, just as a man looked out and said:

"What does this outrage mean, Buffalo Bill, that you, an army officer, are holding up a coach and robbing honest passengers?"

"You have not been robbed to any alarming extent yet, Dud Ross. But come! No nonsense. Come out of that coach mighty quick, and one at a time."

"Get the lariats ready, Len, to tie these fellows. Do you hear, 'Out with you!'"

The man hesitated, and Buffalo Bill sent a bullet through the top of the coach just above their heads.

Instantly the man called Dud Ross jumped out, to be at once thrown to the ground by the scout, disarmed, and bound.

"Next!"

Another man came out and was also quickly disarmed and bound.

"Number Three!"

Out came yet another to share a like fate.

"Number Four!"

There was some hesitation, and Buffalo Bill was leveling his revolver when Number Four stepped from the coach.

He had a slouch hat pulled down far over his head, a bushy beard, and long hair.

The scout grasped him with no gentle grip, and off came his hat, a wig and false beard.

"Why, Doc Driggs, it is you? and masquerading, eh?"

There was an exclamation from the two Boy Sure-Shots, and Buck Dawson uttered a cry of surprise.

"Well, I know'd they was a bad lot. Yer see, Bill, they tuk passage with me

at the last of the mining camps, and they pretended ter be awful afraid they would be held up and robbed.

"But, yer see, I had my eyes and ears open, and I seen and heard enough ter know they intended ter jump me somewhere on ther trail and git er big lot of yellow metal in ther rough I has along."

"They know'd about it, yer see, and though Doc Driggs got away tother day, and Scotty with him, yer see he begun bad work ag'in mighty quick, and if ther feller yonder hain't Scotty in disguise, I'm lying like a Turk."

The man he pointed to had his beard and hair cut short, wore a changed hat, and suit of clothes, but was none other than Scotty, who had escaped with the outlaw leader.

"Well, Buck, they are safe now, and you can carry them on to the fort, but keep your eyes on them, and if they give you any trouble, they will go quiet enough if you kill them, you know, and it is better that than to be robbed or shot by the cut-throats."

"Tell the colonel that I will make a full report to him of what I know of these men when I return to the fort."

"I'll do it, Pard Bill, and I does thank you and them Boy Sure-Shots of yours fer all yer has done for me."

"Don't mention it, Buck; but keep your eyes open for any straggling redskins, for we have had a big fight with them and they scattered, yet a few may be about."

"Thankee, ag'in."

"But, yer see, I have ther horses yer wanted—the Mail Rider's; they is thar in the lead."

"And good animals they are. We'll just unharness them and put the boys' horses in their place."

With this the scout and Buck took the leaders out of harness and having dismounted and stripped their animals of saddle and bridles the boys led them forward, Len Ashley remarking:

"I don't know whether my horse will work in harness or not, Mr. Dawson."

"I never asks them, Boy Pard, for when I slaps ther leather on them they has to go as I wishes."

The two animals, however, took kindly to the harness, and the four prisoners, having been bound securely in the coach, Buck shook hands warmly with Buffalo Bill and his Boy Sure Shots and mounted Bill and his Boy Sure-Shots and mounted his box.

"If I gits a load of deviltry to carry in on each run, Pard Bill, we'll soon clean up ther trails of road-agents," the driver said as he gathered up his reins.

With a call to his horses and a whoop, Buck Dawson started up the team, the two new leaders going off well and at a lively pace.

Buffalo Bill and his young friends watched the coach out of sight, and then the scout observed:

"Well, Harold, we have the two horses your father rode the mail trail with, and one of his dogs, and none of them have forgotten it, I feel sure, for animals have lasting memories."

CHAPTER XXV.

TRAILING THE MYSTERY.

"Now, Boy Pards, my plan to trail this mystery of the midnight mail rider," said Buffalo Bill, when the three were in camp. They have had dinner, the horses were staked up, and Death Grip was doing guard duty.

Both of the boys waited eagerly for the scout to explain what his plan was, which he soon did.

"I happen to know something of the trails taken by the Mail Rider. He did

not stick to one trail, but had several, but all were near each other. Sometimes he would go one trail, then another, so that he was hard to head off by foes.

"Of course, the horses he rode, and his dogs, knew each one of these trails, and now the two horses and one of his dogs we have here with us."

"We will go to a spot I know of and make a crossing of the mail rider's trails. When we find them all—and I believe there were three, but not more than four—we will take one at a time and follow it from beginning to end."

"This will show us the way, and we'll search along each trail for some clue as to his fate."

"After the long time that has passed it will be no easy task to find clues; but I place great hope in our dumb friends here, and it is well known that the mail rider had his horses and dogs wonderfully trained. Buck Dawson, you know, told us that they were almost broken-hearted when their master disappeared."

"One of the horses, the bay, was with him on his last ride, and his dog Scout never came back."

"The more I think it over the more I am convinced that the mail rider was killed by road-agents, and if so, we will find either his grave or his skeleton by the trail."

"Now we will start on our trailing of this mystery of the Midnight Mail Rider's fate."

The two boys had listened with the deepest attention, and were convinced that if any one could solve the mystery of Mr. Hart's mysterious disappearance Buffalo Bill was the one to do it.

The start was accordingly made, Buffalo Bill riding the horse which the mail rider had ridden the day he disappeared.

Reaching a valley that cut through several ranges of mountains, Buffalo Bill turned up it, and, after proceeding a few miles, said:

"All the mail rider's trails crossed this valley. I feel certain that when we come to one this horse, or the dog, will turn into it, one way or the other."

He had hardly spoken the words when the horse he rode turned abruptly to the right, just where there was the crossing of a small stream.

The other horse and Death Grip did the same, though there was no trace of a trail.

"We have found the first trail, lads! Now to follow it!"

When the range was reached there was found a well-marked deer run, leading up the mountain side.

The horse that acted as a guide followed this without hesitation.

Arriving upon the mountain top, the horse was given the rein, for the deer trail there branched out into a number, as the game had scattered to feed and for water, for a number of little lakes were visible upon the plateau, and about them the grass grew luxuriantly.

The horse ridden by Buffalo Bill stuck to one of the trails running straight across the plateau.

As he reached the other side large boulders were visible and pines and cedars were plentiful.

Among these the trail the horse followed was plainly marked.

Along went the dumb guide, and after awhile, although the trail was plainly visible, he turned abruptly off among the boulders.

Buffalo Bill halted the horse, but he

was freiful under restraint, and anxious to go on.

The scout turned him back to the trail, started him once more back over it, but at the same spot he turned off again.

The other horse and Death Grip were tried, but they stuck to the trail.

"What does it mean?" asked Harold.

"I do not know," from Len, but the scout made no reply; he was deeply thinking.

At last he said:

"Boys, this is the horse ridden by Mr. Hart on his last ride. I shall let him lead the way. I am certain he knows what he is about. See how nervous he is, and, as I said before, animals have good memories."

Mounting again, the scout allowed the bay to go on as he pleased among the boulders.

After a quarter of a mile the horse halted, when his rider at once dismounted and looked about him for signs.

The boys did the same.

Suddenly the scout spoke:

"See there, boys! It is a broken revolver; and, yes, it is all rusted and has been lying here for a long time."

The scout picked it up and saw that the butt had been shattered by a bullet and the hammer was broken off, but there were two loads yet remaining in the weapon.

As they were examining the little gun they were startled by a long-drawn out howl from Death Grip!

The dog had strayed off a short distance from the spot, and hastening toward him they found him gazing eagerly down at the ground.

As they approached him he raised his head and gave another dismal howl.

"Boy Pard, Death Grip has made some important discovery," said Buffalo Bill, and as he searched the spot where the dog stood, he beheld a well-like hole in the rocks, looking down into some dark recess below!

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOLD BY THE DEAD.

The hole in the rocks was barely large enough to admit of a man's form, but Buffalo Bill said:

"Here will the story be told, Boy Pard. The bay horse has been a most faithful guide, and he knows what happened here. See, he is no longer nervous now!"

The horse stood quietly by, with the others, but the dog seemed wild to get down into the cavern, if such it was.

"We'll lower him, Boy Pard," Buffalo Bill decided.

A blanket was taken, lariats attached to the corners, and Death Grip was placed in it.

He made no resistance, and was lowered into the opening.

The distance down was some twenty-five feet.

The moment the blanket touched bottom the dog sprang out.

Instantly the blanket was drawn up, while Death Grip began to bark, whine, and howl alternately.

"He has made a discovery. I will go down now."

"No, Mr. Cody, you are too large, I fear. Let me go!" urged Harold.

Buffalo Bill saw that the opening was hardly large enough for him, so said:

"I guess you are right, Harold; but, with the dog there, it is all right. Leave

your belt of arms, so you can squeeze through better."

This the youth did, and Buffalo Bill instructed:

"Make your lariat fast to that tree and slip down, while I cut you some pine-knot splinters for a torch.

When Buffalo Bill came back with a handful of pine fat splinters he found that Harold had slipped down the lariat and was in the darkness below, while Leonard Ashley was just preparing to follow him, having also laid his belt of arms aside.

"Here, Len, take these splints with you, and light them as soon as you get down into the cavern."

Then Len Ashley swung himself upon the lariat, and, after a slight effort, got through the crevice in the rocks.

Down he went, and, lying flat down, the scout peered over.

He saw a match lighted, the pine torch caught, and in the bright glare he gazed upon a strange sight.

Buffalo Bill beheld the two Boy Sure-Shots, the dog, a skeleton, and some leather mail bags.

Death Grip was silent, now, standing by the side of his young master, and there, on the rocky floor, lay the skeleton form of a man.

At his feet lay his rifle, and in a dark corner was another skeleton—that of a dog.

There, also, were two leather mail bags, still bearing the U. S. locks unbroken, but in each a slit had been cut with a sharp knife, and the contents taken out.

Upon the floor scattered about were a few letters, all torn open. Many of them had contained money, beyond a doubt.

Harold Hart knelt by the side of the skeleton form, and he knew now that there was no doubt; it was all that remained of his father.

Upon the left little finger, around the bone, was a ring the youth well knew, and there were other marks of identification.

"I am too late," the youth said in a choking voice. Then his eyes fell upon a package of letters in one of the bony hands.

He grasped them, and a pencil fell from the hand also.

Upon the envelope of each had been written in an unsteady hand with lead pencil what was evidently the story of a dying man.

Each envelope was numbered, and the boy read, by the light of the torch:

"If my body is ever found, know that it is all that remains of Harold Hart of Texas, now known as the Midnight Mail Rider of the mines.

"I was attacked upon my ride by road-agents, led by a masked chief whom I did not know, but among his band I recognized men known as Doc Driggs, Scotty, Sam Bird, and others.

"They shot me because I resisted and killed two of the gang, and believing me dead, threw me into this cavern, along with my faithful dog, my rifle, and the mail bags, which they robbed of all in them of value.

"I write this, knowing that death is near, and the one who finds my remains will convey a lasting favor by sending the news of my sad end to my son, Harold Hart, Jr., Sunset Ranch, via San Antonio, Texas.

"I can write no more.

"HAROLD HART."

Holding out the last of the envelopes read, the one with the signature upon it, Harold called out to the scout, looking down through the crevice:

"Mr. Cody, the fate of my father is told here by his own dead hand!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

The mystery was solved.

The Midnight Mail Rider's sad fate was told by his own hand, having written the story with pencil upon the backs of the envelopes, the contents of which had been rifled by the road-agents.

The names, also, of the robbers had been revealed, one, Sam Bird, having met his fate at the hand of Len Ashley.

But, Doc Driggs and Scotty were still alive, and had gone on to the fort in Buck Dawson's coach, bound hands and feet, as prisoners.

They would be safe when wanted.

The skeleton form of the mail rider and that of his faithful dog were taken up tenderly, and placed in the blanket, which Buffalo Bill drew up out of the cavern.

The mail bags also were taken, for they were to be sent to the United States Mail Department, to show that Harold Hart had been true to his trust, and had not been false, as many had assumed.

The rifle and other things found in the cavern were also drawn up by the scout, and then the dog, after which the two youths followed.

Down the mountain side, to a pretty spot upon the banks of a small stream the remains of the mail rider were borne, and there going into camp, a grave was dug, a coffin of poles was made, and the much-wronged man was laid at rest, his dutiful son reciting over him the service of the dead.

That night the three pards spent in the little camp near the grave, and the next morning the trail was taken up for the fort.

The horses were given their time, and a camp was made on the way; but they arrived the next morning, to find that Major Timpson had come in, after a most successful chase of the Indians.

Straight to the quarters of Colonel Ramsey went Buffalo Bill with his two Sure-Shot Boys, and there the story was told of the fate of the Midnight Mail Rider, and the mail bags and letters shown.

But, Colonel Ramsey also had a story to tell, for the coach had come in with Buck Dawson, seriously wounded, lying across the top, and his four prisoners gone.

The treasure he carried had also been taken, and so it was that Doc Driggs, Scotty, and the others had at last escaped.

"Boy Pard, we must track those men to the gallows," said Buffalo Bill, in his determined way, when he knew all.

And Buffalo Bill and his Boy Sure-Shots did track them to the gallows, after a long and deadly trail had been followed to the end.

THE END.

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